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The Church and Christianity

by Hans Hermann Walz

The Nature of the Church

Adult Christianity

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MANY Disciples met Dr. Hans Hermann Walz at the Disciples Study Conference on Ecumenical Issues, held in Chicago last August. Others know of him through his work with the World Council of Churches or the German Kirchentag.

We take this means of introducing him to other Disciples who are interested in the cutting edge of theological thought in Europe, and of sharing with those who already know him two lectures which he brought to American groups last summer: one to the Disciples Study Conference and the second to the Boston Ecumenical Institute.

Dr. Walz is presently General Secretary of the Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag (German laymen's movement). From 1949 to 1954 he was Secretary for Laymen's Work in the World Council of Churches and from 1952 to 1954 Assistant Director of the Ecumenical Institute at Celigny, Switzerland. Dr. Walz is a Lutheran, son of a pastor, and has doctoral degrees in law and theology. Dr. Walz was instrumental in the founding of the Evangelical Academy at Bad Boll, Germany, in 1945, which provided special opportunities of study and rehabilitation for interned war prisoners. He later became Secretary of the Study Association of the Evangelical Academies in Germany.

In his capacity as Secretary for Laymen's Work of the World Council Dr. Walz has visited laymen's movements in many parts of the world, helping them develop relationships for their mutual stimulation and common action. He has edited the World Council's bulletin, called *Laymen's Work*. Dr. Walz has written several booklets on questions of modern philosophy, law and theology. His articles on "The Bible and Modern Philosophy on the Meaning of Life" and "Man's Freedom in Existentialism and in Christianity" appeared in *Theology Today,* (January 1952) and *Cross Currents* (Fall 1951). Disciples should be interested in his survey of "Signs of Renewal in the European Churches" which appeared in the *Ecumenical Review,* January 1953.

ROBERT TOBIAS

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THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

By

H. H. Walz

I. The Importance of the Subject and the Need for a a New Approach to It

REGARDING our subject, "The Nature of the Church," two apparently contradictory observations have to be made first. It is not a low church man but one of the most well-known theologians of the Roman Church on the Continent who has said: "The Church existed for about 1500 years without reflecting upon its nature and without attempting its clarification by a logical conception" (Bartmann, *Kath. Dogm.* II, 137). The fifteen hundred years during which the Church did not develop what we now so conveniently call an ecclesiology were the years before the Reformation. Since that time many attempts have been made both by Catholics and Protestants to give a doctrinal definition of the Church. But one may even go a step further and declare with Father Florovsky that all these attempts which meanwhile have been made belong more to the School than to the Church; that is to say, they do not represent more than the opinion of a group of scholars within given churches. The question, What is the Church, has become therefore a matter for theological debate among scholars rather than the subject of an overall church course. Another eminent Roman Catholic states frankly that until the present day the Church has not defined herself in any formal sense (R. Groscha). This, I think, is true of almost every church.

On the other hand, in the last thirty years no single subject of theology has occupied the minds of the ablest theologians more than the nature of the Church. Let us look for a moment into the reasons for this ever increasing interest in the Church.

One reason is the plight of individualism, both secular and religious, which could not come to grips with the realities of our age. The totalitarian state in Germany, for example, and in the German-occupied countries during the war was resisted not so much in the name of the individual Christian conscience as in the name of the Church. The individual can be managed in some way or other by those in power. The Church is a body which by its very existence does not fit in any totalitarian concept. It is in this context that the phrase was coined: "Let the Church be the Church." This did not

mean, as it was misinterpreted later, a withdrawal of the Church from its political and social responsibilities to a neat preoccupation with purely ecclesiastical matters. Rather, it signifies that if only the Church were truly what it ought to be, it would be an explosive force blowing up every attempt on the part of the State to close its universe without God.

Another reason why the Church came into the foreground is a new sense of the necessity for community life as essential to human life and a new awareness of the need for spiritual authority in the ordering of our confused lives and minds.

Along with all this there was the rediscovery of the importance of the Church in the thought of the New Testament and early Christian writers and the relevance of many of their ideas to our own problems.

Finally, the Ecumenical Movement, which in its origins was anything but church-minded, has revealed the overarching importance of the concept of the Church more through its actual development than through purposeful intuition. It has made us conscious of the fact that the concept of Churches, meaning by that Christian denominations, is incompatible with the concept of the Church as it is held in the New Testament. At the same time the Ecumenical Movement was driven to demonstrate that the problems of the unity of the Church cannot be solved only by the good will of individual Christians. The Churches must commit themselves to the solution of this problem which if solved will lead to the disappearance of the Churches as denominations. Volumes have been written on the Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches—this is the title of the famous Toronto declaration of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches—; on the Nature of the Church—this was the subject of a comprehensive study of the Faith and Order Commission to which the study and thought of hundreds of groups and individuals made a contribution—; on the origin of the Church in the Old Testament, in the teaching of our Lord and in the experience of the early Christians; on the Church's ministry, its mission and functions and its relation to the Kingdom of God; and finally on the concept of the Church as related to the concept of the Trinity.

I do not pretend to know more than, let us say, ten per cent of the literature which has been published on these subjects since the end of World War I. What I happen to know, however, is far too much to be presented even in the most general outline in the time at our disposal. Instead of making a futile attempt to cover everything I shall

emphasize certain aspects of the nature of the Church which in most of the literature which I know are largely overlooked. This negligence has contributed to the fact that at present the theological and the sociological understanding of the Church are divorced from each other so that both theological and sociological definitions are defective in themselves. The sociological facts about the Church and the Churches need to be understood in the dimension of theological categories. What theology in its turn needs to understand and evaluate is not so much its shadowy conceptual offspring born from an act of self-impregnation as the sociological data. These data represent themselves as God's mighty acts, although mediated through the horrors of human sin and the mediocrities of human obedience. Christian theology is grounded in the fact that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Sociology and all other sciences, on the other hand, have their motive power in the assumption that what can be known about them has to be found by untiring human effort and no God will reveal anything in these fields.

Now it is precisely in the area of tension between the revealed and the explorable that the nature of the Church must be found, and it must be understood in theological terms why this is so. Because the Church has an empirical side which is subject to changes in time and place it cannot easily be defined once and for all. Yet, so far, theology has failed to recognize the significance of this situation. Instead, the Church became the object of sometimes wild theological speculation which is controlled neither by sound doctrine nor by sober facts.

A simple phrase such as "the Church is the people of God," shows the dilemma in which we are. On the one hand, this is certainly Biblical language; on the other, we must ask, what does it actually say? Is "people" here a purely theological term which cannot be explained by analogy with various sociological usages of the word? Or is it sociological and then what are its marks? To put the same question in other words: is the expression "people of God," as used for the Church, an image or a reality? The question becomes even more vexing when applied to other Biblical expressions for the Church, such as the Body of Christ. An answer to these questions cannot be given before the nature of the Church in relation to the world has been clarified on theological grounds. What I am attempting to do here is a step in this direction.

First, I shall have to speak about the nature of the Church as constituted by its relationship with the world. Secondly, we shall

consider the nature of the Church as qualified by its mission to the world. Finally, we shall say a few words about the nature of the Church as witnessed to in the life of the congregation and its individual members.

II. The Nature of the Church as Constituted by its Relationship with the World

The Church cannot possibly be conceived in static terms. This has often been said and rightly so. We must go still a step further. The Church cannot be understood in itself. In fact, it is nothing in itself. It exists only in relationship with the world and its existence is its nature.

This is important. Hidden in our minds there is so often a Platonic conception as if the Church were an ideal entity, perfect in itself, corrupted only later when entering into the malicious world of our daily realities. In such way the nature and the existence of the Church are divorced. In Biblical thought, however, the nature of the Church is its history, not its idea.

Now the history of the Church goes far back. We are accustomed to think that the history of the Church begins with the teaching and the ministry, death and resurrection of our Lord. There is a sense in which this true. Yet, the Christian churches themselves are part of a greater history, the history of Salvation, that is to say, the history of God's saving purpose as expressed in certain acts of which we know by divine self-disclosure or revelation. In this history of Salvation the Church goes back beyond the days of Jesus' ministry, it goes back to the prophets, the kings and the priests of the Old Testament, it goes back to the holy remnant, left during the days of widespread apostasy, to the people of the Sinai Covenant and to the patriarchs. It is not necessary to give Biblical evidence for the fact that this is the manner in which the early teachers of Christianity looked at the Church. It suffices to recall that the very word Church (*ekklēsia*) is the Greek rendering for *qahal* which in the Old Testament signifies the people of God. Everybody knows how the dignifying words applied to the Sinai people "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6)," were taken up in the New Testament and applied to the New Israel which was the Church.

But the history of the Church goes still further back than Abraham. It goes back to Creation and even beyond the actual existence of our world. "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the

world" (Eph. 1:4). This may seem a strange speculation to many of us, but in fact it is a quite sober though all-important statement about the nature of the Church as being constituted by its relationship to the world already in the purpose of God. I do not think that Karl Barth is right in contending that in God's intuition the Church is primary and the world only secondary and that it is on behalf of the Church that the world was created. I rather think that from the very beginning Church and world are related to one another in such a way that theologically speaking neither could exist without the other. They have their very nature not in themselves but in their relationship. The history of the Church is the history of God's saving purpose and this purpose would really be purposeless if it were not directed toward the world. It is therefore—to say the least—utterly misleading when Edwin Lewis (in *A Philosophy of the Christian Revelation*) says: "A primal creative act brought the world into being. A second primal creative act brought the Church into being." This leads in the end to a sectarian conception of the Church.

The intimate interrelationship which exists between Church and world becomes manifest also when the Bible speaks about the end of time as we know it. It is obvious that only images can be used to describe things which by their nature are beyond the power of human imagination. The new state of things is called the resurrection from the dead, the Kingdom of God, or the new heaven and the new earth. It is never called the new Church, however. The reason is that the very concept of the Church is so much bound up with the world, the world as we know it, the created and also the sinful world, the explorable world of which I have spoken, that when this world has come to an end, as Christians believe it will come, it makes no sense to speak of the Church any longer.

I have suggested that the nature of the Church is its history, a history which begins, so to speak, in the moment in which the world comes into being and which ends with the end of this world. What now is the nature of the Church between these two point events of which we can talk only in mythological language? Is there not a sharp distinction, even a complete separation of Church and world, and does not the Bible frequently warn us that we should not mix the two things? There is no question that in a very real sense the Church has to be not only distinguished but even separated from the world, but I contend that even this separation can only be understood Biblically in the framework of basic relatedness. The Church must do everything,

whether it cooperates with the world or it retires from the world, on behalf of the world if it does not want to cease to be the Church. A Church which thinks of itself as being a self-sufficient community of those who have been saved regardless of what happens to the rest of mankind and to the whole universe is some sort of mystery cult but not the Christian Church.

The Church is universal in character not only because its limits are not confined to a certain race or nation but because intentionally the whole universe is envisaged in every particular act of the Church. Such particular acts which represent the whole are: two or three gathering together in Christ's name, a congregation worshipping by word and sacrament, a church rendering some kind of social service to a group of people or a nation. In confessing our sins to God we confess the sins of human kind, in receiving forgiveness we receive God's universal grace. It is for that reason that "sinfulness belongs to the very nature of the Church," as Emil Brunner has once remarked (*Divine Imperative,* p. 526).

There is a Latin phrase which expresses best the basic relationship of the Church to the world in the period limited by the fall of man at the one end and the consummation in glory at the other. In that period the Church is the *pars pro toto* in respect of the world. I do not know how to render this expression into proper English. What I mean is that the Church represents the world in its unworthiness and disobedience, in its being punished, that is to say being forsaken by God, in its being restored time and again and being connected with the source of life apart from which we must die, in its adoration of God's glorious name when it joins with the heavenly hosts and in its hope—quite particularly in its hope. The Church must not confess Christ as its hope if it does not mean by that that Christ is the hope of the world, as the main theme for Evanston runs. In Abraham, who has always been understood as one of the great symbols of the people of God or the Church, all generations shall bless themselves. The suffering servant of Second Isaiah, another such symbol, is told that "it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the end of the earth." In the rich and meaningful symbolism of the Eastern Orthodox Church it is made quite clear that those who happen to celebrate the Holy Liturgy together in a given church building are in that moment representing not only the Church universal over all places and ages but also the whole world.

I do not know whether I have made my point sufficiently clear. I have to struggle all the time with two language difficulties; the one is my incapability of expressing myself freely in English; the other is the incapability of all our modern Western languages which think in spatial and positional terms to express a relationship in action where two things may be inclusive of one another without being identical, and where, as we still shall see, the relation from one to the other is irreversible because it is a historical movement. I may close this section therefore with a word in more traditional though highly technical language. It has been emphasized in recent years by many scholars who have co-operated in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches that ecclesiology, *i.e.*, the doctrine of the Church, should be brought into the most intimate contact with Christology, *i.e.*, the doctrine of the nature of Christ. I think that this intention is worth every support. I should like to add, however, that only if Christology is rewritten in soteriological terms, *i.e.*, terms taken from the work of Christ or the history of Salvation, can the doctrine of the Church gain new depth and more reality from this process.

III. The Nature of the Church as Qualified by Its Mission to the World

Speaking now about the mission of the Church, I do not want to suggest the traditional distinction between the Church's nature and its mission. In fact, I think that this distinction implies one of the most damaging errors in the conception of the Church. If the church first has a certain nature, independent of what it is doing and, secondly, gets a certain mission, independent of what it is, the door is open to all kinds of strange activities and unlawful inactivities for which the present life of most of our Churches provides abundant illustration. The nature and the mission of the Church are one and the same thing, because, as we have seen already, the Church is the incarnation of God's saving purpose for the world. What has been said so far about the nature of the Church, namely its basic relatedness to the world would, however, be incomplete and perhaps even misleading if we did not add a certain qualification to it. Therefore we have now to speak about the mission of the Church.

The Church is not simply related to the world, but it is related to it in a certain way. The Church is sent to the world. "As the father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). This is the foundation of the Church and therefore the Church, by its very nature, is the Apostolic Church, the Church sent. Thereby, and only thereby, the

Church participates in the nature of Christ Himself because He is the envoy, the sent one par excellence. Thus He prays: "As thou didst send me into the world, so have I sent them into the world" (John 17:18). The Church is the more Christlike, the more it directs itself to the world.

Here I must insert a word about the ecumenical movement. Its aim is a clearer manifestation of the essential unity of the Church. The Churches which have joined the World Council of Churches are agreed that this aim cannot be pursued merely by negotiations between the existing churches with a view to merging or to uniting. The unity which is the goal of the ecumenical movement cannot be the result of a compromise among the existing church bodies. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not leave us and our Churches unchanged. Unity can only be brought about by the renewal of each individual church body. The Faith and Order Commission has well said in the name of their churches: only as we draw nearer to Christ we draw nearer to one another. Now, how do we draw nearer to Christ? By taking seriously our mission to the world, by realizing that we are sent even as he was sent. The renewal of the Church is not an indoor process whereby some repairs in the decoration of the church are made. The renewal of the Church is the renewal of its mission to the world, its responsibility for the world.

I am convinced that in our days God Himself has begun to renew the Church by driving it out of the secure corners of a pious life of its own and thrusting it into the perplexities and dilemmas, the temptations and the depressions of the modern world. I know what I am saying here. The renewal of the Church which is the prerequisite of the ecumenical movement is not an easy thing. It is not a few theologians or church leaders sitting together and having some nice ideas. It is not masses of laymen and laywomen activized in the service of the Church. It is not assemblies like that at Evanston. All this may be of some value, and it is the only thing which we can do in regard to the renewal of the Church for the time-being. At its best, however, this is a preparation for something else. It lies on the same level as the movement to reform the clergy in the twelfth, the lay movements of the fourteenth, and the conciliar movement of the fifteenth century. They all helped to prepare the way. But the real renewal came only with the storm of the Reformation when the old Church was threatened with death and eventually broken into pieces, and not everybody who had a share in the preparatory events took part in the final thing.

The renewal of the Church which I think is imminent to our generation means that our churches, church activities and church assemblies must change to the point of dying as the grain of wheat must die in order to bear fruit. The ecumenical movement, and even more so the World Council of Churches, is not a fulfillment. It is a preparer of the way, not more. But this is its honor as it was the honor of John the Baptist who baptized the people for the repentance of their sins.

If we speak as we must of the mission of the Church in these radical terms and if we remember that the Church's mission is its very nature then we see that the Church is not an institution but a process, a sequence of point events in time. This process is always directed toward the world. But it takes different facets: sometimes it pours into the world, filling every phase of a certain civilization, but then the danger is near of its losing its distinct characteristics. At another time it forms a concentrated and even exclusive minority group which is a sign pointing to the open sky as up against the totalitarian tendencies of a certain age or civilization. But then the Church is in danger of becoming self-sufficient and even self-complacent. At all events, as long as it is the Church it has to die for the sake of the world to which it is sent and whose life depends on the dying of the Church in its midst. This death takes many forms according to time and place. Essentially, however, it follows a twofold pattern: the Church fulfills its mission if it dies away from its conformity with the world, thereby protesting against the spirit of a certain age to which itself it has been subject, and the Church dies away from its sectarian separatedness from the world thereby giving itself wholeheartedly to the needs and joys of the people testifying that God has so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.

In this way, death is the law of the life of the Church. We cannot develop the theological implications of this insight; it must suffice to remark that they are bound up with the soteriological character of the doctrine of the Church. Only in passing, however, I should like to mention that from here new light is thrown on the sociological question of the Church. It is now clear, I should think, that because of its very nature the Church appears in various sociological forms, such as a gathering, a foundation, an association, a movement, an institution, a state church, a free church or a people's church, in the Old Testament even a nation, and in the Middle-Ages a community of nations or a civilization. But in the moment when the Church takes

on these sociological forms they are doomed to die, or, more precisely, the Church must eventually die away from them and will therefore leave them in the end as empty stereotypes.

Therefore, although the Church exists at no time without some such form, no such form may ever claim to be the Church or the ideal and once-and-for-all vessel of the Church. Although at any time the Church is visible on earth it is always hidden from the eyes of those who look for it in terms of organization. Time does not permit to show how from this point of view theology and sociology could join in writing the history of the Church. The Church is there where this process of death and rebirth takes place. But remember—death means the end. It must not be taken as a means to rebirth. Otherwise dying becomes a trick to save one's life. And whoever and in whatever form would save his life will lose it (Matth. 16:25). This is the temptation of a Church that knows its Bible and its theology so well that it forgets how dreadful a thing it is "to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). The mission of the Church is not a reason for pride and self-assurance on the part of the Church but for fear and self-abandonment.

IV. The Nature of the Church as Witnessed to by the Life of the Christian Community and the Individual Christian

Not much time is left and indeed not much needs to be said if one thing is clear: either the nature of the Church as related to the world becomes manifest in the life of our Christian communities or we are simply not the Church. In this case we are somthing else, perhaps something very decent and respectable, perhaps an association of Jesus worshipers or an organization for the promotion of human relations and higher moral standards, but not the Church.

Three tendencies, at least, which are prominent in much of the church life of which I know are incompatible with the nature of the Church as we have described it. The first is a certain kind of institutionalism which assumes that the first task of the Church is to be well established or well run. Europeans usually think more of establishing their Church, Americans perhaps more of running their Church, but virtually it is the same thing. In both cases the Church is taken as an end in itself, a danger which lurks particularly in the minds of us clergy and all ecclesiastical officials: the church program must be attractive, the church building comfortable and the church service beautiful. A similar attitude is reflected in the minds of many laymen,

especially those whom the parson would call fine Christians and devout laymen. They know that they have to earn their living in the secular world and they do it either with blushing timidity or with ruthless matter-of-factness. But it is in church that they are exalted to higher spheres. Here they find an outlet for their better self in singing and praying, in lay preaching and ushering, in raising money and selling pamphlets. It is in the service of the Church that they feel they are Christians. And to be a Christian means for them to be organized in the service of the Church. This is ecclesiasiticism which by implication denies the true nature of the Church. It is introvert Christianity turning the Christian faith into a religion instead of realizing that it is a mission. It is like carving an arrow which is perfect in every respect except that it cannot be shot. Christianity must be lived not in the Church but in the world. The church organization is a means to that end, not more. That is not minimizing the task of the organized Church. With the wide world in mind the organized Church has enough to do.

The second danger which paralyzes the life of many of our best and most active churches is very much akin to the first one, except that here a relation to those outside the life of the Church is established. But it is the wrong kind of relation. I should like to call it proselytism. Proselytism looks at the Church as an association which needs to be made powerful by the enlargement of its membership. It looks at the people outside the Church as potential converts. It wants to bring as many people as possible into the four walls of the Church and it does not question for a moment that the Church is really there where its banner flies. It has never thought of bringing the Church to the people so that the Church may become part of their lives, instead of making the people part of the life of the Church. To these eager evangelists people are numbers, objects, not fellow human beings with whom we live in solidarity of human need and sin. Connected with this proselytism is often a deathbed theology. By that I mean the exploitation of human needs for spiritual purposes. Much of our traditional apologetic theology is deathbed theology. Men are shown that they cannot solve their problems, *e.g.,* the problem of atomic war, and, therefore, the argument goes, they need a God. That is all very wonderful, except that Christians cannot solve the problem of the atomic war either and that Christ came to the rescue of men not only when they were at their worst, but even more when they were at their best. I have no time to go into this but I wish you would help me to

think about the question of whether we preachers can go on presenting God as the panacea for all human problems instead of presenting him as the Lord who makes us suffer more deeply, who makes us be less sure of ourselves than others and yet live more gratefully.

My third point is clericalism. By clericalism I do not mean the rule of clergy in the Church over against laity. This is a problem, but a relatively innocent one which can be solved as the clergy becomes more acquainted with the daily lives of laymen and laymen become more acquainted with the elements of Christian faith and doctrine. Clericalism, as I use the term here, means the attempt of a religious minority group to govern public life by its principles. This is perhaps one of the most subtle temptations befalling the Church time and again, and I mention it here because it could seem as if precisely this was meant by the mission of the Church to the world. Contrary to the dangers of institutionalism and proselytism, here the Church throws itself into the life of the world, it directs its message to the world and it takes responsibility for the world. Is it not simply wonderful when Christians make the public obey Christian rules such as Sabbath observance, abstention from alcoholic beverages, prohibition of divorce? No, this is not wonderful. It is falling into the third temptation of ruling the world which Jesus resisted. How can Christians ever believe that what may come as a fruit of the Holy Spirit could be enforced by legal measures of a State where those who really hold these convictions are only a minority? You may answer: it is for their own good that people are forced to live up to Christian standards. It is the Communists who impose upon people their own good. God does not force people to love him although it would be better for them to do so. Christians have no commandment to rule the world. But they have the commandment to serve their neighbors and to love even their enemies. Service does not mean to establish worthy principles but to help other persons at the very place where they are. Love does not force but it persuades. Such love which gives itself defenselessly to those who do not know what love is is the true fulfillment of the nature of the Church. It is dying and rising with Christ.

ADULT CHRISTIANITY

By

H. H. Walz

ONE OF the matters which inevitably will be decisive for the common course of Christianity in the next decades is whether the function of the laity of the church will be seen in its true perspective. The actual problems of laymen's work may be different in the different parts of the world, but the direction in which we have to look is everywhere the same. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the witnesses of the Confessing Church in Germany and one of the victims of the Gestapo, called it "Adult Christianity." It was his conviction that "man has achieved adulthood" and that, therefore, the Church must not deal with people as if they were still children. This applies as much to relationships within the organized church itself as to the more important relationship between Church and world. For the grown man of our day God is no longer necessary as a working hypothesis, explaining things which otherwise had been inexplicable; and even if men are caught, as they always will be, by some major difficulties and dilemmas, the Church should not attempt to make capital out of, let us say, the failure of liberalism to liberate the world from all kinds of anxieties or of humanism to develop everywhere the full possibilities of human kind at its best. In this respect the Church has done no better for nearly two thousand years; and the Christian faith should not come to men as an appeal to their inadequacies but as an appeal to their unique privilege of being the mature sons of a Father who calls for their love rather than simply their dependence.

What I have tried to point to would mean no less than a revolution in the conception of the Church, in its relation to its members and in its relation to the outside world, if it were realized in its full consequences. I believe that it is by the Providence of God that new light is only gradually breaking into the Church, thus enabling the Christian community to adjust itself to new light as it comes. If my own fervent wish that more people may see more clearly and may act more decidedly in this matter is limited, it is mainly through the awareness of my inability to grasp in full at least the portion of insight which is given to me through ten years of work in the Evangelical Academies in Germany and in the Secretariat for Laymen's Work of the World Council of Churches.

I will go right to the heart of the matter as I can see it and suggest three main points for further emphasis.

(1) Only if the Christian community makes a determined effort to be closer to the kind of life which many of its lay members have to live in industry and business, in politics, social relations, and cultural activities, can it hope to extend its influence beyond the limited number of those who, by sheer tradition or by the lack of initiative rather than by firm conviction, are members of the Church. This we may call the *evangelistic* aspect of laymen's work.

(2) Only if the work done and the life lived by Christian laymen in the world are seen and experienced as truly representative of the nature and mission of the Church, can Christianity attempt to be what it ought to be—the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This is, as it were, the *missionary* aspect of laymen's work.

(3) Only if Christians are prepared to give unfettered recognition to the relative values in secular things will they be able to witness to the uniqueness of the redemption brought about by Jesus Christ which is more than just a solution to some technical, scientific, or moral problems. This may be called the *priestly* aspect of laymen's work.

1. *The Evangelistic Aspect of Laymen's Work*

We have said that only if the Christian community makes a determined effort to be closer to the kind of life which many of its lay members have to live in the secular society of our day, can it hope to reach outside the limited number of the present actual and potential church membership.

It is my conviction that, by and large, the days are almost past when the Church could convert people outside its traditional adherents, either by its ordinary services, Bible classes, Sunday schools, social activities etc., or by popular mass evangelization of the kind in which half a century ago great men such as Moody excelled. One must, of course, be very cautious with general statements of this kind. The circumstances vary very much in degree according to countries, local and regional areas, and sociological stratification. There is still a good deal of spiritual power exercised in some parts of the world by Christian communities with an active church membership. Moreover it is not only sectarian groups, but also undertakings such as the German Evangelical Kirchentag and the evangelization campaigns

undertaken by men like Billy Graham which prove that the sincere proclamation of the Gospel delivered in modern language and with the help of the technical means at our disposal in modern society appeals to hundreds of thousands of men. But I am afraid that even by such methods the Church misses contact with most people who are not already within the orbit of the Church, and among them many who are good representatives of our industrialized society. Up to a certain point revival is still possible with those who through their homes or friends once had been acquainted with some basic elements of Christianity. But revivalism is not possible where there is nothing to revive. The memory of pious mothers or moving confirmation classes does not work with people who did not have such mothers and who did not go to confirmation classes. Now there is no doubt that this is the case with a growing majority of people in our day. In this respect there is not much difference between countries which are considered pagan and others which were formerly called Christian countries.

Sociologically speaking, in many countries the Church is a middle class affair. And this fact has shaped, more than we are aware, the pattern of church life. By the word "pattern" I mean not only the way in which the church as a social unit is run but also the moral standards, the spiritual outlook and the human conduct which prevail in church circles. There is only one way to overcome the fatal consequences of this fact and that is to decentralize the life of the church. I am fully aware that this is contrary to many efforts which in ecclesiastical circles are commonly regarded as the most promising ones in the life of the Church of our day. But I am afraid that by centralizing and strengthening the life of the Christian communities as they actually are, we are only compounding the traditionalist and middle class tendencies working in the church which account for the fact that many secular people regard Christianity as being entirely irrelevant to the problems of our day. If, on the other hand, we force Christian people to engage their Christian "capital" in living together with those outside the Church, e.g., their colleagues at work, their partners in business, their political friends, their fellow members in professional associations, instead of clinging together with their Christian brothers five evenings a week, we shall not only help them to be witnesses of the Gospel to those who do not know it, but also to overcome for themselves the peculiar atmosphere prevailing in the church and to be Christians breathing the air of modern life.

There is a second reason why the Christian witness should be borne by those fully engaged in the business of the world. It is a

psychological fact that many people today have a deep-rooted suspicion of the spoken word and all kinds of propaganda. The spoken and written word has been misused in our time to a point that not only is its power to convince largely lost, but also it appears immediately as a disguise. When hearing speeches or reading articles, many people no longer ask, "what do they say?" but they cannot help asking, "why do they say this?" One of the most obvious answers to this question is in many cases, "because they are paid for it." With regard to evangelism this means that the witness of professionals, such as ministers, church workers, or others who appear to have some vested interest in the Church, has lost much of its authenticity in the eyes of many outside the Church—and even of quite a number of churchgoers.

The conclusion is that the access to the modern world is barred to the organized services of the Church in many cases either by sociological or by psychological barriers. They can be overcome only if it is the laymen who are the witnesses on behalf of the Church. By "laymen" I understand, for the purpose of this article, not simply the unordained members of the Church, but mainly the section of church membership who are fully engaged in the so-called secular life. It is not their task to preach during office hours or to talk to everybody about their happiness in being a Christian. You can observe in every cinema that people are not appealed to by clever rhetoric but are moved by simple acts of human friendliness. What matters more than the spoken word *is* their presence in the life of the world in the name of Jesus Christ. Today this name is witnessed to more through quietness than through talkativeness, more through a little gesture of understanding and help than through big words, more through seeing the deeper reasons for the many wrongs which are done in marriage and business and politics than through passing moral judgments. It is the unpretentious presence of Christians in the actual working of modern life that will draw to Jesus Christ the attention of some of those who do not know Him.

What has been said does not mean that there is no place for the spoken word in evangelism today. In most cases, however, the process of conversion does not begin with the word but with a deed, as Jesus Himself did not begin with teaching and preaching but with abandoning His Glory and becoming man. Christian laymen, who know their business in the world and who know at the same time what they believe, find countless opportunities where the spoken word comes quite naturally. But these words will not be some so-called Christian generalities; they will be related to the actual situation in which the

man who is a Christian and the man who is not meet. In short, the substance of evangelism today cannot be to bring people into the Church but to bring the Church to the people. This must be done mainly by the laity.

2. The Missionary Aspect of Laymen's Work

Only if the work done and the life lived by Christian laymen in the world are seen as truly representative of the nature and mission of the Church, can Christianity attempt to be what it ought to be—the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

On my second point, which is the missionary aspect of laymen's work, you may ask, "what is the difference between evangelism and mission in this respect?" I admit that in certain cases the two words may be used for the same thing. But I insist that the Church's mission is more than converting a number of individuals, important though this is. If you now define evangelism as the activity of the Church, the purpose of which is to convert people to Jesus Christ, you are bound to distinguish between evangelism and the mission of the Church. The mission of the Church is not one of its activities. But it is its *raison d'être*. By its very nature the Church is a missionary community. For its being is to be sent. Thus, the Church is related to the world from the very beginning. This idea was expressed very clearly in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus compared the Church with a city which is set on a hill; whether it develops certain activities, such as trading with the neighboring villages, or not, it is seen there, and is in this way related to all the neighbouring regions by its very being.

In the same context Jesus uses two other images in order to point to certain qualities which are inherent in the nature of the Christian community if it is truly Christian. First, He calls His disciples the salt of the earth, i.e., the element which prevents the world from becoming stale. The world has a natural tendency towards totalitarianism, i.e., it wants to make of itself a neatly closed universe in which everything has its given place and nothing is allowed to disturb the order which is imposed on it in the systems of great philosophers and thinkers as well as in the systems of totalitarian dictators or industrial overlords. A closed universe, however, is a static affair which functions mechanically but in which no initiative is possible. It has been proved in more than one instance that the Church only through its *being* is a block in the way of all system-mongers. It does not fit into any system which is too neatly built. It is the power

which time and again destroys part of the sheltering roof or the imposed superstructure under which people seek protection against sunshine and rain or under which they are forced to bow for the benefit of those in power. The Church is the gauze which prevents the wound of the world from closing prematurely.

It is this missionary aspect of the nature of the Church which most clearly is reflected in the life and in the work of laymen. As the salt is dissolved in the soup in order to give it its savour, Christian laymen are dispersed in the world in order to preserve it from becoming a totalitarian or closed universe. I have often wondered in recent years whether it has not been a mistake to concentrate the doctrine of the Church so much on its being gathered. I think that the Church will appear to be gathered from the four winds of the earth only at the end of history as we know it. For the time being the Church is not a gathered community, but, to use the paradoxical phrase of one of the Reformers (Melanchton), "the community of the dispersed." Without dispersion there is no savour. It is the laymen, not gathered in the church building, but busy everywhere in the world, who must truly represent the Church as an element of stimulation, of creativeness and criticism, as a challenge demanding response which means *life* for the world.

Practically speaking, this means many things which could be illustrated in the actual life of laymen in their different places and functions. I mention here only one thing which in our world is of primary importance. Christians may be determined members of a political party, determined protagonists of a certain cause, determined followers of a certain line, but they can never be total ideologists. As fighters for free enterprise they do not forget that the community has certain obligations towards those who, for some reason or other, are not able to make their little boat sail in the strong winds of competition. As socialists they realize that individual liberty should not be sacrificed to public welfare, but that increased public welfare should be an increased chance for liberty of an increased number of people. In other words, Christian laymen should exercise everywhere a healthy influence so as to relativize things which by their very nature are relative, namely politics and business and everything on earth.

It is of equal importance for the church as related to the world by its very existence that Jesus calls His disciples the light of the world. A light does not shine for its own sake; it is contrary to its nature to be put under a bushel. As so many others, this image has

often been misunderstood in the course of church history and thus led Christians to regard themselves as superior to their fellowmen. The schoolmasterly attitude which many Christians feel obliged to assume when speaking about politics, business, sex life, and many other things of this world, is entirely contrary to the Bible as a whole and to this image as Jesus must have meant it. Adults do not need schoolmasters. The world does not necessarily need more knowledge, let alone incompetent counsel. It does not even need in the first place higher moral standards, although eventually these may be part of what Jesus meant here. The world is not so much dark in itself as it is opaque in relation to what is beyond it. What makes the world so opaque is that in itself it is without an issue. It is heavy, stuffy, you may say, without a meaning transcending its immediate reality. The light of which Christ speaks here does not appear as Christian enlightenment but as divine transparency. It does not result in making everything plain, but in transfiguring the things of this world.

If this is so, the light which the world needs cannot be imposed on it from somewhere else, as from some astral body outside the hulk of this earth. Certainly the source of the light is Jesus Christ Himself, and only in relation to Him can Christians be called the light of the world. But even He did not remain outside the body of the human kind, so as to illuminate it from above, but he entered into it, so as to radiate it from within. The Church which through its members is already part of the world makes itself ridiculous if it assumes a superior position. It is quite obvious that laymen form a solid part of the world and it should not be otherwise. But as Christian laymen they should at the same time be those instances where the world with all its "busy-ness" becomes transparent, where it loses its gravity. They should be like windows which certainly are part of the house, but through which the light and the air from outside may enter. It is not so much through concerted action of the Church as a body, but it is through the life and work of laymen that the world should be radiated.

In particular, many things could be said to illustrate this idea in the very life of laymen. In passing I shall mention only three qualities through which the life and work of laymen in the world of today should be characterized. First of all, I think of a certain reliability which is opposed to the kind of conformism and opportunism which are so common in the mass society of our day. Christians should be less disturbed than others when new powers come into being, new ideas arise, new attitudes are in fashion. They should not oppose the

new because it is new. Nor should they stick to the old because it is old. But they should go their way in such manner that others may want to have them as friends. The second thing is a certain openness of mind which enables them, in spite of the routine which dominates our technical age everywhere, to have new ideas, to be imaginative and inventive and, most important of all, to understand other people. Thirdly, it has come home to me in recent years with imperative force that one of the highest Christian values is humor. It stems from the relativism which regards relative things as being relative and which refuses to worship any idols. It is humor, as opposed to the over-seriousness of people who know only success and efficiency, that makes secular things and human relations lighter.

I am sure that you have realized that what I am speaking about is in actual fact the age old thing of Christian love. Love is the most perfect expression of the nature of the Church because it means *being* for others. Only this idea has been very much sentimentalized and trivialized, and we must try to express in new words what is actually meant by it. Love could never come from the outside, because in this case it would always be open to the suspicion of being condescending. Love can only come from within, from the basis of solidarity on which human beings find themselves. In this sense Christian love is nothing else than genuine humanity.

With all I am saying here I am not dismissing the task of the Church as a body or even as an organization. Only the order of things must be clear. The aim is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. As things are, this aim must be achieved in the life and action of laymen living in secular society. It is an important task of the Church as a community to help its laymen fulfill this function. We have no time here to ask what this would mean for the actual services which the organized Church would have to render to its members. In this respect I refer to the survey on The Laity—"The Christian In His Vocation"—which was prepared for Evanston and to the Report of Section VI of the Evanston Assembly.

3. *The Priestly Aspect of Laymen's Work*

I have said only if Christians are prepared to recognize the relative values inherent in secular things will they be able to witness to the uniqueness of redemption in Jesus Christ which is more than just the solution of some technical, scientific, or moral dilemmas. This is perhaps the most important aspect of all and certainly the

least recognized. Among the many people who in recent years have written on the relation of the Christian message to the modern world I know only about a dozen who have begun to realize what is at stake here. Among them are a few theologians, one of them J. H. Oldham, a few philosophers, one of them Gabriel Marcel, a few scientists and doctors, one of them Friedrich von Weizsäcker.

It is not the task of the priests to feed people, to build houses, to order society, and to govern the nation. It is not even their task to penetrate into the mysteries of nature and the human spirit. All this is the proper task of "the people in the world," including the laity of the Christian Church. The only function of a priest is to reconcile with God the feeding of people, the governing of a nation, the scientific penetration of nature. In our days we have learnt that people can be fed without God. Fertilizers produce better crops than prayers, as Kathleen Bliss once said in a lecture, and contraceptives are a better insurance against having too many mouths to feed than faith in providence. We have learnt that nature can be discovered up to a point where it explains itself, and that it is only poor taste to call the rest, which is still inexplicable, God. We have learnt that nations have to be governed through the co-operation of all their citizens, whether they believe in God or not, whether they are Christians or not. All alike must have their fair chance to express their own value judgments, lest the loyalty to the good as I know it may become the way to tyrannical domination of the clique to which I belong. In other words, modern men, if they are daring enough to say what they experience, are no longer able to see God as an element, whether as the universal cause or even as one operating factor of the world itself.

This is not atheistic thinking but truly Christian insight, although it has been obscured time and again for many centuries in the Christian Church. For most of the heathen religions the deity belongs intrinsically to the world. The gods and goddesses in Greek religion, e.g., were the powers which ran the world. They were the motor which brought the dead elements of the material world into motion—making water flow, trees grow, boys love girls. As a consequence of their belonging to the world they were localized in it. They were more intensely present in one place than in another, more in the mysteries of procreation, birth and death, of sleep and dream, or of drunkenness, than they were in more rational activities, such as making clothes or trading. Hence, you find in most religions the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the notion of taboo, and many

other things which indicate the localization of the deity in the world.

At least in principle, Christianity has done away with the distinction of sacred and profane. There are no godheads localized in the world and, therefore, no holy premises, holy times, and holy activities which in themselves are nearer to divinity than others. God does not belong to the world; He is its creator, but He remains apart from creation. He is not in the world as the Greek gods are, but He comes into the world. He does not come in order to teach men how to make fire and how to cultivate fields. He comes in order to draw the human kind nearer to Him, not to leave man in sin, which is living apart from Him, alone, lonesome, perishable, as he is in spite of all his undeniable knowledge and skill. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is quite right in saying that as far as the world is concerned man can very well do without God. Of the great Reformers it was mainly Luther who frequently emphasized that "in the secular sphere one must act on reason . . . God did not send the Holy Spirit from heaven to teach us in the Bible how to build houses, how to make clothes, how to make love, how to make war and peace, how to steer ships and things of that sort." In his recent book *Life is Commitment,* J. H. Oldham reminds us that it was Baron von Hügel who, in the clericalizing and moralizing atmosphere of his Victorian days and country, re-expressed the concept of the autonomy of secular things as up against clerical tutelage and petty moralism. He, being a devout Christian, said that there are areas and levels of life that are governed by their own laws which religion must respect.

This does not mean that religion has nothing to do with actual life as it is lived in technical society. It is the function of a priest, we have said, to reconcile earthly things with God. In most religions this leads to some kind of sacred activities apart from ordinary life and to a caste of priests apart from the rest of humankind. In Christianity, however, it is entirely different. Since we know that the Father of Jesus Christ has reconciled Himself to the world and the world to Him, the testimony of this reconcilation is possible through every lawful activity and by every true believer. Christians know that their salvation does not come from what they do but from what is done to them. Therefore, everything they do, whether it is religious or secular activity, needs to be done and seen in the light of what is done to them. In other words, every human work is and remains on the same human, earthly level and, on the other hand, no human work is excluded from the possibility of being transfigured by the grace of God, that is to say,

by what God alone can do. In principle, working at the assembly line, if done to the glory of God, is not less Christian than teaching the Bible; and preaching a sermon is not more religious than speaking in parliament, although the one thing helps to build the Church and the other to maintain life on earth. Both things need to be done and it it is Christians who do the one thing or the other they know that in doing these things they are called to sanctification. Sanctification means doing human things with the belief that God has redeemed the world, and, therefore, with the hope that men may become a means of the divine love. It also means offering up everything that we do, our failures as well as our success, to God so that He may use both for His purpose. This must not be understood, of course, as a psychological trick of turning failure into a success. In this way sanctification is the necessary result of the belief in justification by faith. It is the contrary to sacralism as it is found in most pagan religions and in much so-called Christianity. Derived from sanctification is the evangelical concept of saintliness. Saintliness means living everywhere in the presence of God as belonging entirely to Him. Saintliness in the evangelical sense means, in addition, not primarily seeking such presence of God in the desert or in the monastery as being in some sense apart from the world, but living by the belief that everything may become transparent of God's presence, if He so pleases, and that we belong to Him not because of our holding Him but of His holding us. This belief may lead some people into the ministry, some even into the desert or to a monastery; but it certainly leads many people to accept their ordinary work as the thing they have to do, knowing however that it is secular, transient, and ultimately relative.

God enters into our human affairs in His own right and not as a service-boy to achieve purposes. It is God's glorious work not only to mend our imperfections but to redeem even our perfections. He will redeem us and the world in which we live from the transitoriness, the emptiness, and vanity to which they are subject without Him. He gives meaning and value to our lives and works beyond the meaning and value they have in themselves. He gives purpose to our doings beyond the purpose which we have in mind. He harmonizes our individual freedom with the individual freedom of others and He harmonizes our collective freedom on earth with His majority in heaven. God is not necessary for the ends that we mortal beings are pursuing. But what He pursues is necessary in order that we may not perish.

Laymen are by definition people who are mainly occupied with transient things. It is to those people that Jesus may want to say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."